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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR WEIGHS IN WITH ENVIRONMENT MINISTER
AGAINST GUM TAX

1. On October 18, the Ambassador, Chicago-based Wrigleys CEO Ronald Waters, and UK Wrigleys Chief Officer Alistair Whalley met with the newly appointed Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Dick Roche, to discuss alternatives to the Irish Government's proposed 5-cent-per-pack chewing gum tax. The tax, which would raise revenues to clean streets soiled by discarded gum, would not change Ireland's permissive attitudes toward litter, while dampening gum sales, explained the Wrigleys representatives. As an alternative, Wrigleys had offered the GOI a financial commitment to establish an industry board that would build anti-littering social awareness through educational programs and stronger enforcement of littering fines. Waters mentioned that pilot programs using this approach in the UK had reduced gum litter by 50 percent, and the Ambassador added that the civic pride fostered by such programs would help to diminish littering and clean-up costs over the long run. Waters also stressed that the industry continued to work on making gum more bio-degradable, with the challenge of retaining anti-cavity ingredients that had led the dental profession to endorse gum-chewing.

2. Roche said that the GOI sought a well-rounded approach to gum litter problems and would seriously consider Wrigleys proposal before the October 29 deadline on the public comment period for the proposed gum tax. He noted that 90 million packs of gum were sold annually in Ireland and that discarded gum accounted for roughly 18 percent of food-related street litter, with the proportion rising as smokers switched to gum with the recent ban on smoking in public places. He added that gum's stickiness led typical small towns to spend euro 40,000 per year on street sprayings. Roche acknowledged the logic in Wrigleys' argument that changes in social behavior offered the best long-run solution to gum litter problems, but cautioned that the GOI was under pressure from local governments to be seen as tackling these problems in the two years left before general elections. The tax, if implemented, would be a visible measure that would help local governments to cover clean-up costs in that short span, said Roche. He added that the Department of the Environment had not made a final decision on the tax and would continue to consult with Wrigleys and the industry over the coming weeks.

3. Comment: Roche, a former International Visitors Program participant, is a close Embassy contact and favorably disposed toward the United States. In his former post as Minister of State for European Affairs at the Department of Foreign Affairs, he was an important USG interlocutor during Ireland's recent EU presidency. Roche was also a central player in Member States' negotiations on the EU Constitution, and his appointment to the Environment Department was seen as a reward for such efforts. Roche made environmental issues a focus of his 12-year parliamentary career and has told the Ambassador that he entered politics out of anger over illegal waste dumps in his Wicklow constituency.

KENNY